Chapter Four
Plato’s Theory of Knowledge

**Key Words:** knowledge as recollection, Parable of the cave, cave analogy, eye-analogy, flux, dialectical method, intellectual midwifery,

The previous chapter has examined Plato’s theory of ideas, which constitutes his metaphysical theory. We have seen that Plato posits a separate realm for accommodating his real essences or Ideas, a world of ideas, where the Ideas are hierarchically ordered. He refuses to grant any value to the world of sense experience. But if sense experience cannot be trusted, then how do we comprehend the ideal essences? In this context, Plato introduced the dialectical method, which is a method of thinking in concepts and arriving at final definitions about concepts by means of which we think.

But, interestingly, this method presupposes that the soul already possesses all knowledge and dialectical method only helps us to “recollect” them. Plato thus seems to be arguing that, “all knowledge is recollection.” Hence his theory of knowledge presupposes a unique theory of the soul, where the latter is conceived as eternal. This chapter focuses on these problems.

Plato in *The Republic,* narrates an incident where Socrates is engaged in a conversation with Glaucon.

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: --Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various
materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners. Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Here the cave symbolizes the human body and the chains are the senses through which we get knowledge about the sensible world. Plato argues that, since the senses can only give knowledge about the objects of the fleeting empirical world, and not about the world of Ideas or essences, they fail to give us any knowledge at all. We may have only opinions about the sensible objects, which are bound to be confused.

The Parable of the Cave is about those people who are ignorant and live in the inferior world of sense objects and they are compared to prisoners in a cave who are chained and hence are only able to look in one direction. They have a fire behind them, a wall in front and between them. On the front wall they see their own shadows and the shadows of objects behind them and think that these shadows are real, as they have no idea about reality. The body conditioned by the senses (cave and chains) prevents the intellect from having an access to the
real truth of things. He sees only the sensible objects and considers them as real. The cave imagery suggests that they are actually shadows and not real.

But one man who escapes the cave and comes out sees the sun and the objects around him in the sunlight. Initially he finds it difficult to comprehend the real state of affairs. But gradually he comes into grip with reality. The sun here stands for enlightenment or wisdom, which reveals absolute reality to the intellect. The man who escapes the cave now realizes that he had been deceived by shadows. Plato says that, if such a man who had truth realization thinks that it is his duty to help his fellow-prisoners also to escape from the cave (body and senses), then he is a philosopher or guardian, the ruler of the people. Plato’s theory thus connects the metaphysical theory with an epistemology that answers the questions; what is knowledge? How do we get genuine knowledge? What are the genuine objects of knowledge? He not only distinguishes knowledge from opinion, but also separates the objects of knowledge from the objects of opinion.

Such a distinction is against our common understanding of the distinction between knowledge and opinion. As Russell says, we can form an opinion about something and can also have knowledge about the same thing. Russell gives an example for this. He says that, if I think it is going to snow, then that is an opinion. But if later I see it snowing, that is knowledge. Here the subject-matter is the same on both occasions. This is contrary to Plato’s view, which considers knowledge and opinion as dealing with different subject-matters. For Plato knowledge is possible only about ideas and about particular, sensible appearances we can form only opinions.

From the analogy of vision, Plato derives another argument to support his theory of knowledge. Where there is normal light, we see things clearly. In twilight, things appear ambiguous and unclear and in darkness, nothing is seen. In this analogy, the eye symbolizes the soul, which knows the reality, sun is the source of light and hence it symbolizes truth or goodness and wisdom. Twilight stands for confused vision and darkness for ignorance. This analogy is employed in order to explain the difference between clear intellectual vision and the confused vision of sense-perception. The eye analogy is crucial because sight is
different from the other senses, as it requires not only the eye and the object, but also light.

Plato categorically asserts that there is nothing worthy to be called knowledge to be derived from the senses as they reveal only appearances or copies of the essences. Knowledge about the essences is the real knowledge which can be captured by the intelligence only through concepts. This position evidently amounts to a complete rejection of perceptual knowledge.

**Refutation of Perceptual Knowledge**

Plato holds that the perceptual world is in a constant flux. Here he agrees with Heraclitus who affirmed that one cannot step into the same river twice. The objects undergo constant change and the perceptual world is a world that is in a process of becoming. Therefore, perception deals with knowledge of what becomes and not of what is. It fails to capture the true being of things. The Cave analogy had made this clear. The senses reveal only the shadows, the unreal copies of the real and substantial Forms, which are revealed only to the intellect in pure rational reflection.

In perception, both the subject and the object undergo rapid changes. Change in the percipient causes the change in the percept. Hence perceptual knowledge itself cannot remain changeless. This implies that nothing is fixed and everything is in a process of constant flux and hence uncertain. Plato in his *Theaetetus* examines the nature of perception. In his conversation with Theaetetus, who is a student of mathematics, Socrates enquires what is knowledge? The initial answers given by Theaetetus were not satisfactory, as Socrates went on insisting on clear and accurate definitions of terms and concepts employed. Here Theaetetus presents three definitions of knowledge.

1. Knowledge is perception.
2. Knowledge is true belief.
3. Knowledge is true belief with an account.

Socrates refutes all these accounts. The first account says that knowledge is perception and this insight is connected with the philosophy of two other thinkers: Protagoras and Heraclitus. If we identify perception with knowledge, we have to deal with the perception of all kinds and by all types; the perception of men, animals, mad men, dream perception etc. Again, if we follow Heraclites’
principle, “one cannot step into the same river twice”, we cannot make any assertion about anything, as things undergo rapid changes preventing us from fixing their meaning.

Russell presents an interesting account of the refutation of perceptual knowledge. He says that we perceive through eyes and ears, rather than with them. He points out that, there are certain things that are not connected with any sense organ. He cites the example of knowledge about existence and non-existence. There is no special organ for accessing knowledge about existence and non-existence, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and differences, unity and numbers in general, honourable and dishonourable, and good and bad. In such cases the mind plays a very crucial role. It contemplates some things through its own instrumentality, others through the bodily faculties. Russell adds that, though we perceive hard and soft through touch, it is the mind that judges that they exist and that they are contraries. Only the mind can reach existence, asserts Russell, and we cannot reach truth if we do not reach existence.

Plato's theory thus advances the thesis that claims that knowledge consists in and is the result of intellectual reflection and sense perceptions or impressions are not only the source of invalid knowledge, but are misleading and confusing. Perception cannot result in the intellectual comprehension and hence in knowledge. It cannot foster the apprehension of truth, since it has no role in apprehending the true existence of ideas or essences. Plato thus insists that, in order to access reality and truth that consist of essences and thereby gain knowledge, we have to go beyond sense perception and thereby, beyond the world of particulars.

**The Dialectical Method**

This intellectual comprehension of the universal idea from the scattered particulars is done by the formation of concepts. The mind has to classify concepts by relating, combining, comparing, dividing, synthesizing and analyzing them. The dialectical method has been introduced in order to make this possible. It is the method of thinking by means of concepts. As a methodology, it was originally employed by Socrates, who through conversations with people
practiced the art of eliciting truth with incessant questioning and uncompromising insistence on definitions of terms.

However, the dialectical method presupposes certain things. It cannot be applied in all contexts and cases. For example, to get any factual information about the world, we may not apply the dialectical method. Only when the objective is to grasp the essences we need to employ them.

**Presuppositions of Dialectical Method**

The dialectical method primarily assumes that the real is immortal and imperishable and hence genuine knowledge is about knowledge of essences that are eternal and imperishable. The dialectical method further affirms that, since the knowledge about these imperishable essences is neither known through the senses, not does the soul have any other means by which it knows about it, the human soul must be already in possession of it. Plato’s philosophy assumes that the soul must be immortal and it already has knowledge about reality, which it has forgotten due to its association with the body and the senses, which function as cave and chains. The dialectical method thus aims at a recollection of these already known truths, by enabling the soul to rise beyond the confusing particulars.

Since knowledge consists in the recollection of already known truths, the dialectical method is expected to foster this process. Socrates was compared to a midwife, and his approach was known as intellectual midwifery. Like a midwife who assists the woman in delivering the child she bears in her body, the intellectual midwife, through constant questioning and argumentation, assists us to gain genuine knowledge, which our soul already possesses, but has forgotten due to our association with the body and senses. The dialectical method which as mentioned above, is a method of thinking in concepts, where we ultimately recollect what we already know. It fosters this process by removing all confusions and bringing in the necessary clarity in our thinking process. It thus aims at capturing the essences of things, which are not revealed in sense perception. Socrates pretends that he does not know anything and asks questions. In this process, he exposes the confusions and contradictions of his opponents and forces them to commit contradictions. Hence the process is actually a process of clarifying thoughts.
Plato’s Republic, Book I depicts an argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus, who was a Sophist in Athens. The topic of the dialogue is the concept of justice. Thrasymachus, in a style typical of the Sophists, argues that justice is the interest of the stronger and affirms that might is right. He argues that the government, the rich and the powerful can make and change laws, ordinary people cannot. Socrates challenges this definition and tries to prove Thrasymachus wrong.

As mentioned above the basic assumptions are (a) the soul is immortal (b) the soul already possesses all knowledge (c) all knowledge is recollection (d) Socrates is an intellectual midwife who helps others to arrive at right knowledge about reality.

Plato’s theory of knowledge argues for the fundamental separation of the soul from the body; a dualism that played a crucial role in his epistemology. The soul is the abode of pure ideas or abstract essences, while the body with the senses drags us to the world of perishable particular objects. Men are deceived by the senses, tempted by the temporary sensual pleasures and the result is the confused vision comparable to the one we have in twilight. Clear intellectual vision is possible only when we free ourselves from the temptations of sensual experience. Plato urges for this liberation, which philosophers achieve with careful intellectual pursuits. The philosopher should not be a slave to ordinary pleasures and should not care for fleeting worldly pleasures. On the other hand, he must be entirely concerned with the soul, which is immortal. The philosopher should try to free the soul from its communion with the body, as the latter is a hindrance in the acquisition of genuine knowledge.

This amounts to a conclusive rejection of empirical knowledge. Plato’s epistemology thus strongly advocates a scheme of dichotomies where he fundamentally distinguishes appearance from reality, particulars from the universal essence, sensible objects from ideas, perception from reason, opinions from genuine knowledge and finally the body from the soul. Plato proposes a tripartite theory of the soul, where it is conceived as constitutive of three basic aspects; the rational, the spirited and the appetitive. The rational aspect is characterized by wisdom and knowledge, the spirited by valor, energy and courage and the appetitive by temperance. Plato argues that, though these three
aspects are features of all human souls, the dominant aspect determines the kind of man someone is. The rational aspect is dominant among people who are guardians of the society. They possess the wisdom that is required for planning and decision making at the state level. Plato's Republic is thus ruled by experts. The soldiers are those in whom the spirited aspect dominates and hence they exhibit the courage required for protecting the society from enemies. The appetitive aspect dominates in the tradesmen.

Plato's Republic is thus an ideal state which is rules by the Guardians, protected by the soldiers and supported by the tradesmen.

Quiz

1. Dialectical method is not:
   (a) A method of thinking in concepts    (b) A method by which we arrive at final definitions about concepts    (c) Method by means of which we recollect what we already know    (d) Method by which we validate our sense experience.

2. In the analogy of vision twilight stands for:
   (a) Confused knowledge    (b) Ignorance    (c) Wrong apprehension    (d) Wisdom

3. Why according to Plato, does perceptual knowledge cannot remain changeless?
   (a) The reality is in constant flux    (b) Change in the percipient causes the change in the percept    (c) Perception depends on a world that changes    (d) All of the above

4. Which of the following is not true for the dialectical method?
   (a) Aims at genuine knowledge that is about essences    (b) Enables human soul to gain knowledge through the senses    (c) Aims at a recollection of already known truths    (d) Aims to capture the universals.

5. Which is not a presupposition of Platonic theory of knowledge?
   (a) The soul is immortal    (b) Rejection of empirical knowledge    (c) All knowledge is recollection    (d) Genuine knowledge is possible about the world of sensible objects.
Answer Key:
1. (d)
2. (a)
3. (b)
4. (b)
5. (d)

References and Further Reading

Books

Web Resources
2. Plato on Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*: at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-theaetetus/